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SUBJECT: AUSTRIA: RIGHTWING LEADER BASHES OPPONENTS, ASYLUM SEEKERS
IN NEW YEAR'S ADDRESS

REF: VIENNA 27

¶1. (U) Heinz-Christian Strache, head of Austria's rightwing Freedom Party (FPÖ), blasted the ruling Social Democrats (SPÖ) and People's Party (ÖVP) while calling for the deportation of lawbreaking asylum seekers during a January 10 rally launching the party's campaign for the citywide elections in October.

¶2. (U) Like a pop star, Strache burst onto the stage through a paper wall to the strains of Carl Orff's "Carmina Burana" blaring from the loudspeakers. The crowd of about 2,500 included people of various ages and socio-economic backgrounds. However, there were more teenagers and 20-somethings than we have seen at most events held by the other parties (the voting age in Austria is 16). Many of the young people were members of various party-affiliated youth and student organizations, reflecting the party's success with Austrian youth. There was also a large amount of beer being consumed, noteworthy given that the event took place on a Sunday at 9 a.m.

¶3. (U) Strache, the most youthful and telegenic of Austria's politicians, delivered a speech that was rousing at first, but began to drag as it continued for over 90 minutes. The FPÖ leader made bold predictions for the coming year, promising gains in the provincial elections in Styria and Burgenland, as well as Vienna. He depicted the Vienna election as a head-to-head contest between him and incumbent Mayor Haupl, whom, he said, had "failed in everything he has attempted." He called the long-dominant SPÖ organization in Vienna "a bunch of dinosaurs" ripe for defeat. The FPÖ leader was more restrained in his comments regarding the April 25 presidential election, promising only to nominate a candidate to run against heavily favored SPÖ incumbent Heinz Fischer. None of the major parties has so far named a candidate to compete against Fischer.

¶4. (U) Though the content of the speech was standard FPÖ material, the audience was nonetheless enthusiastic and sometimes raucous. Flag waving and overt displays of patriotism are generally frowned on in Austria, but FPÖ events are an exception. The convention hall was strewn with Austrian flags and symbols. Immediately following Strache's speech, supporters sang the national anthem followed by a chant of "Austria, Austria, Austria."

Comment: Restrained, but Not Reformed

¶5. (SBU) While Strache took shots at all the familiar FPÖ targets, including foreigners and Muslims, his language was more restrained than in past speeches. We have noticed that the FPÖ's new campaign posters are also more subtle - slogans like "The West in Christian Hands," and "End Islamization" have been replaced with calls for "immigration reform." An FPÖ contact told us party leaders are confident that the FPÖ's recent success indicates that their message has gotten across, and they no longer need to use harsh rhetoric to get attention.

¶5. (SBU) Strache is not likely to be elected mayor of Vienna - even FPÖ contacts acknowledge that they expect Haupl to place first. But

the FPO may finish a strong second and deprive the SPO of its absolute majority in the province, bolstering its image as a party on the rise.

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